



## **UNBRIDLED LEARNING - COMMUNICATIONS AND COLLABORATION**

On November 2, 2012, the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) released the first round of data from the Unbridled Learning assessment and accountability model. This release was the culmination of work that began in March 2009, with the passage of Senate Bill 1 (SB 1) in the state legislature.

The release of data went smoothly, and there are a number of factors that contributed to the success of the release:

- Legislative Authority
- Communications
- Partners
- Teacher Support and Involvement
- Business Community Support

# **Legislative Authority**

Kentucky has a two-decade history of legislatively mandated public school assessment and accountability. The 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) included requirements for state-level assessments in a variety of subjects and an accountability model using scores from those tests and other measures to provide information about school and district performance.

The assessment and accountability model underwent many changes from its inception, but the concept remained the same: test all students over a broad spectrum of subjects, assign labels to schools and districts based on performance, and report the data produced by the system.

With the passage of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2001, Kentucky implemented a two-tier system that used test score and other data from the state model to provide information for NCLB requirements, along with continuing to provide accountability labels as mandated for the state model.

In 2009, the Kentucky General Assembly passed Senate Bill 1 (SB 1), which impacted many of the existing state laws that governed assessment and accountability.

SB 1 mandated that a new assessment and accountability system be developed and implemented for the 2011-12 school year. This piece of legislation, which passed without opposition, was the result of months of collaboration between legislators, educators, state officials, partners and constituents.

The Kentucky Board of Education is responsible for promulgating administrative regulations that further define and provide details about statutory requirements. The board began discussing and approving regulatory language related to SB 1 in 2009.

# **Communications**

KDE began communicating about its plans and work for this new system within weeks after the bill was signed into law.

Communications took many forms:

- a web page dedicated to activities around SB 1 and providing supporting documentation
- presentations at meetings of Kentucky's eight regional educational cooperatives, each composed of local school district superintendents
- articles and informational items in KDE's publication Kentucky Teacher, which is designed as a professional development tool for teachers
- webcasts for teachers and administrators that provide opportunities for real-time input
- frequent e-mail messages to educators, partners, legislators, media representatives and others focused on the building of the new system
- blog postings related to NCLB, assessment, accountability and other related items
- news articles and editorials about the new assessment and accountability system
- discussion in Kentucky Board of Education meetings, which were webcast live and accessible to the public

The core message in all of these communications vehicles was that Kentucky was moving toward preparing all public school students for college and/or careers, and that effort would start as soon as a child entered the public school system, either as a preschooler or in kindergarten/1st grade. A secondary message was that the new assessment and accountability system would be more useful and deep and provide educators, parents, elected officials and communities with reliable data that could be used to move schools forward.

In November 2009, the U.S. Department of Education announced guidelines for the federal Race to the Top competition. Kentucky immediately began work on its application for those funds, using the work related to SB 1 and the proposed accountability model as the core. KDE also began sharing information about the process and how it was connected to the mandates of SB 1.

Even before the announcement of the availability of waivers from the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)/No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in the fall of 2011, KDE began work to fold the work around the new assessment and accountability system into a flexibility request. The agency communicated its plans to do so – primarily through the commissioner of education, who made presentations and wrote blog entries on the subject.

Kentucky's application for flexibility was granted in February 2012. Starting immediately, KDE began working on communications vehicles related to the fall release of data from the new assessment and accountability model, Unbridled Learning. Those included:

- PowerPoint presentations
- blog entries
- parent-friendly brochures

- Q&A compilations
- regular e-mail communications to educators and partners
- stories in *Kentucky Teacher*, the agency's flagship publication

Education Commissioner Terry Holliday began speaking about the upcoming data release and preparing listeners for what the data would show, including lower percentages of proficient students in reading and mathematics. This was tied to the adoption of the Common Core State Standards, which are more rigorous and deep. KDE staff developed scenarios showing the likely percentage drops, and those were shared widely via e-mail, website and presentations.

The commissioner and other KDE staff also promoted the upcoming School Report Card, which was revamped extensively and designed as an online presence. KDE had published School and District Report Cards for many years, but only as electronic copies of paper documents. The new School Report Card was designed to be more interactive and provide more information, and it was tagged to serve as the agency's primary delivery method for data from the Unbridled Learning system.

As a result of the commissioner's public pronouncements and KDE's media contact's emphasis on the data, news stories about the data release began appearing in September 2012. All of those stories were focused on the state- and local-level data potential.

KDE staff in the Office of Assessment and Accountability and Division of Communications began working closely and meeting regularly to discuss how to present the Unbridled Learning data. The Division of Communications also was represented on the team responsible for designing and implementing the new School Report Card.

In October, the commissioner hosted a webcast targeted at the media, during which he answered questions and provided an overview of the system. The archived webcast was made accessible, as were the supporting materials, on the Unbridled Learning web page.

Once a date was set for the public release of data, communications staff began preparing media representatives for the upcoming release. Through phone conversations and e-mail messages, reporters and editors were kept aware of the timeline and of what would be released. Emphasis was placed on the newness of the system; how it could not be compared to prior years' data; the potential for lower percentages of proficient students in certain subjects; and how to prioritize coverage of the data.

The data were provided to media outlets under embargo three days prior to the public release on November 2. During those three days, KDE's media contact spent most of each day on the phone and e-mail, providing clarification and guidance to reporters and editors as they wrote their stories. The commissioner also made himself available for one-on-one interviews that were embargoed for later release.

The data also were provided to school district personnel in the same format as provided to media outlets, so that they could see what their local reporters were seeing.

Starting on the day of the public release, news outlets began running stories about the data. Stories continued to appear in the next weeks, either announcing school and district standings or delving deeper into the data. Editorials and commentaries also appeared.

#### <u>Partners</u>

One of the major efforts that arose after the passage of KERA in 1990 was the work by KDE to connect with education partners. These included state agencies such as the Council on Postsecondary Education (higher education) and the Education Professional Standards Board (teacher certification); state organizations such as the Kentucky Education Association, Kentucky School Boards Association, Kentucky Association of School Administrators, the Prichard Committee (a grassroots citizen advocacy group focused on education); and many more.

In February 2010, the Kentucky Board of Education, the Council on Postsecondary Education and the Education Professional Standards Board agreed to adopt the Common Core State Standards in English/language arts and mathematics. This action was informed by the SB 1 requirements that new, more rigorous and relevant standards be adopted in core subjects. KDE provided news releases, presentation material and other communications items to inform and gather support for this action.

As the board worked to revise state regulations related to assessment and accountability, it gathered input from teachers, administrators, parents, lawmakers and the general public through public hearings, face-to-face communications, e-mail and other methods. Updates also were provided to the agency's advisory groups, which are comprised of specific audience members such as teachers, superintendents, parents and others.

The Prichard Committee, through its ReadyKentucky initiative, was a major partner in disseminating information about the new system, standards and expected results. Staff with the ReadyKentucky initiative made presentations throughout the state, providing a layman's view of what to expect with the first data release and why Kentucky had implemented a new system.

The Kentucky Chamber of Commerce developed the Business Leader Champions for Education, a joint initiative with the Prichard Committee. The group is made up of corporate executives and other business leaders in the state who support public education.

Governor Steve Beshear also became a valuable partner in this work, supporting the agency and the Kentucky Board of Education. Gov. Beshear's Transforming Education in Kentucky Task Force, which issued its final report in February 2011, made several recommendations related to college/career readiness, assessment and academic rigor.

# **Teacher Support and Involvement**

In November 2009, the U.S. Department of Education announced guidelines for the federal Race to the Top competition. Kentucky immediately began work on its application for those funds, using the work related to SB 1 and the proposed accountability model as the core.

KDE's Race to the Top application process included securing signatures from local school board chairs, superintendents and teacher organizations to support the state's application. Signatures were received from all 174 school districts and included representatives of the Kentucky Education Association and local teachers' unions. Also, KDE initiated a survey of teachers and administrators in October 2009 to get their input on the state's vision and plans for public education specific to the Race to the Top application.

Kentucky Education Commissioner Terry Holliday appointed a teacher effectiveness steering committee to follow up from the state's Race to the Top application. This group was comprised of teachers, principals, superintendents and other key stakeholders, and its efforts led directly to the Teacher and Principal Effectiveness Frameworks (Attachment 23 on page 223 of the Appendix) with multiple measures that comprise Kentucky's Professional Growth and Effectiveness System.

In the fall of 2009 and winter of 2009-10, KDE convened workgroups of teachers across the state to review the draft standards, provide feedback and suggest improvements. The groups also compared the state's current academic standards to the new Common Core Standards to help in the development of "crosswalks" between the two sets of standards. Kentucky's adoption of the Common Core Academic Standards in February 2010 began a process in which teachers were heavily involved in the design and implementation of curriculum and training materials. Since SB 1 also mandated new academic standards, and the new assessment and accountability system is directly tied to those standards, teachers' input was crucial in this work.

Professional learning communities (PLCs), groups of practitioners that meet and continuously connect regarding specific areas of education practice, were and continue to be a key component in Kentucky's standards, assessment and accountability work. The PLCs provide a means by which teachers, administrators and other professionals come together to learn, share, critique and process new information within a supportive, district/school-created community.

The state's regional Leadership Networks also played and continue to play a key role in the work around standards, assessment and accountability. These networks are intended to build the capacity of each school district as they implement Kentucky's new Core Academic Standards, develop assessment literacy among all teachers and work toward ensuring that every student is college- and career- ready.

From its inception in December 2010, the proposed accountability model was revised based on feedback from teachers individually and as members of groups such as the School Curriculum, Assessment and Accountability Council and the Leadership Networks. Specific changes suggested by teachers occurred to the subject-area tests, end-of-course exams, Program Reviews and teacher/leader effectiveness portions of the model.

The Teacher and Principal Effectiveness Steering Committees, whose members include teachers, college and university representatives, parents, principals and superintendents from volunteer districts and also represent the Kentucky Association of School Administrators (KASA), Kentucky School Boards Association (KSBA), Kentucky Education Association (KEA), Jefferson County Teachers Association (JCTA), Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE) and Education Professional Standards Board (EPSB), were convened and met throughout 2011 to design the teacher/leader evaluation system. These groups identified the characteristics of good teaching and leadership practice, and their work is ongoing in order to determine the final details of the teacher/leader evaluation system.

## **Business Community Support**

Since the passage of SB 1, Commissioner Holliday and the Kentucky Board of Education have focused on bringing the business community into the conversation about new academic standards and college/career readiness.

The Kentucky Chamber of Commerce has been a strong partner over the past few years. The chamber dedicated staff time and resources to developing materials, sharing information with local chamber affiliates and other activities to support Unbridled Learning.

In the summer of 2012, Commissioner Holliday and Kentucky Chamber President Dave Adkisson embarked on a statewide tour of local chambers. During their visits, they made presentations to chamber members about Unbridled Learning and college/career readiness, connecting the work of public education to business and industry success.

The chamber also made education and funding a priority. Its 2009 report, *The Leaky Bucket*, indicated that areas of unsustainable spending growth – corrections, Medicaid and public employee health insurance –are diverting tax dollars from education and economic development.

The chamber's 2013 legislative agenda focuses on education, saying "To prepare a workforce for future job growth, it is critical to promote and protect rigorous academic standards, ensure degree completion at all levels and keep students from falling behind by increasing our commitment to early childhood education."

The Business Leader Champions for Education group released a statement prior to the unveiling of data from the new system that emphasized the system's focus on college and career readiness. The chamber also produced a brochure, *New Standards, New Tests and New Scores*, that provided parents an overview of the new Common Core State Standards.

## **Lessons Learned**

Unlike other states, Kentucky had two decades of communicating about state-level assessment and accountability models to draw on as the state prepared for data from this new system to be released. Staff at the Kentucky Department of Education, members of the Kentucky Board of Education, school officials and partners could rely on their own experiences in this effort.

Preparation is the key for successful communications, and that was definitely the case for this data release. Staff knew that the media would be the primary vehicle for providing information to residents, so the agency's media contact began "working" reporters and editors months before the release, dropping information about the release, new standards and other items into conversations.

Since the media frequently cover local board of education meetings, school officials also worked information about the data into their regular presentations. And, the commissioner's advisory groups (focused on teachers, parents, administrators and others) included regular updates on the data, the new School Report Card, new standards and other items on their agendas. Discussions of state regulations related to assessment and accountability were held at the Kentucky Board of Education meetings, which are webcast and available to anyone who has Internet access.

With Kentucky's prior experience in releasing test score data, the idea of being proactive for the new data was a given. Education Commissioner Terry Holliday both supports and models open communications, even during "development" stages that many organizations are reluctant to share information about.

One of most important components of the communications was consistency, and that reached from the branding of the system with a formal name (Unbridled Learning) to the language used when sharing information with various audiences. All KDE staff were aware of the work being done around the system, and information was shared widely and through many vehicles (e-mail messages, a dedicated web page, regular face-to-face updates).

Organization also was a key to success. KDE set an embargo period during which school officials reviewed their data and made any necessary corrections to student coding and other items. Then, the "clean" data were provided to media outlets three days before the public release. The data was packaged so that it could be reviewed and understood by the average person, and the embargoed materials included a statewide summary, explanations of the different data components and descriptions of the files provided. The agency's media contact was constantly available for clarifications and to provide answers to questions. A Q&A document was developed, and it featured questions that media representatives were most likely to ask. (This document or portions of it were reprinted by many media outlets.)

Support from teachers, administrators, parents and partners is crucial. Bringing professional organizations and associations to the table early helped set a tone and fostered cooperation.

Pick one overriding goal and stick with it. For Kentucky, it was preparing students for college and/or careers – everything involved in the Unbridled Learning model led to that goal and was supported by continuous improvement.

The main lesson from this data release was that communications does not start once the data are released to the public. It takes much groundwork, public discussion, sharing of information and a little talent in prediction to make the release go smoothly – even if the data do not show positive results for every school or district.